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Levels of implicitness in magazine advertisements

An experimental study into the relationship
between complexity and appreciation in magazine advertisements

Keywords: advertising, implicitness, complexity, appreciation

Some advertisements attract our attention because we do not immediately see what they are about. They incite us to reflect upon the delivered message. Several studies have shown that this kind of implicit messages can have a considerable impact on readers/viewers: elaboration, retention and appreciation appear to increase (Peracchio & Meyers-Levy, 1994, Phillips, 2000, Tom & Eves, 1999, Toncar & Munch, 2001, Mothersbaugh et al., 2002). But what if the complexity of the advertisement exceeds the reader/viewer's capacity of resolution? What are the consequences for the appreciation of the ad? This paper reports an experiment to test the effect of 3 levels of implicitness on the appreciation of advertisements. 88 participants rated their appreciation and experienced complexity of 12 advertisements. The results showed that the level of implicitness has a significant impact on the ad's appreciation. Furthermore, it appeared that appreciation followed an inverted U-curve: advertisements that were considered most difficult to understand were less appreciated than relatively less complex advertisements.

Introduction

In simple, straightforward, explicit advertisements, the image shows what the product is, the text tells us what

the picture is about and what the claim of the advertisement is. Claims in explicit advertisements are generally of the type: 'Product X has property Y'. In other words: in explicit advertisements there is congruence of picture, text and sender of the message. These explicit messages involve less processing effort; they are unambiguous and easy to understand.

However, there is a growing tendency to communicate through less explicit advertisements (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2002): many advertisements contain implicit, non straightforward messages. Why would advertisers refer to an indirect manner to persuade their customers? Part of the explanation can be found in the addition of a third route to the dual processing routes (systematic and heuristic processing): experiential processing (Meyers-Levy & Malavyya, 1999). People like processing advertisements. That is, there resides an effect of persuasion in a pleasurable processing experience. Advertisers are therefore interested in generating an effect of pleasant processing with their readers or viewers. Making advertisements enjoyable can be achieved in many ways; the inclusion of puzzles and riddles may be viewed as one of them. If the message in an advertisement is not delivered straightforwardly, but in an indirect manner, much is left to the responsibility of the reader/viewer. If his¹ capacities to solve riddles are challenged, it may have an effect of (pleasant) arousal (cf. Berlyne, 1971, Tanaka, 1992, McQuarrie & Mick, 1996).

These messages may be called implicit: the interpretation of the advertisement is not depicted or written literally in the message itself, it has to be inferred. In order to 'get' these messages, the reader/viewer has to process them much deeper, more profoundly. More cognitive energy has to be spent to understand. They involve more elaboration (Mothersbaugh et al., 2002, Schilperoord & Maes, 2003), assure longer retention (Tom & Eves, 1999, Toncar & Munch, 2001, McQuarrie & Mick, 2003), and are seen as more rewarding for persons with a relative high need for cognition (Peracchio & Meyers-Malaviya, 1994, Van Mulken et al., 2003). Lee and Mason (1999) and Meyers-Levy & Tybout (1989) have also shown that incongruent information elicited better recall and more appreciation. Houston et al. (1987) report more elaborate processing in cases of picture-word inconsistency in advertisements.

Heckler & Childers (1992 and with Houston 1987) were the first to discuss this phenomenon in the field of advertising and called it 'incongruity'. They point out that expectancy (to what extent is the message conform expectations) and relevancy (to what extent is the message relevant to the main claim) play an important role in the way information is processed and received: the relationship of the message with the ad theme is crucial to its being classified as incongruent.

As appears from the above, the terminology is somewhat ambiguous. Many authors refer to the same phenomenon in other terms. Incongruity (Heckler & Childers, 1992), incongruity (Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989), inconsistency (Houston et al., 1987), unexpectedness and irrelevancy (Lee & Mason, 1999), openness (Eco, 1984), indirectness (Gibbs, 1994) and implicitness (Sperber & Wilson, 1995[1986]) all seem to hint at a similar feature of advertisements that are unclear at first sight or at first reading. We prefer to use the term 'implicitness' suggested by Sperber & Wilson (1995[1986]), which has been developed for the pragmatic framework of Relevance Theory. This theory

claims that every sender and receiver always strives at 'optimal relevance', in that the message is shaped as being as effective as possible with respect to processing effort. The reason we engage in the processing of implicit speech, in spite of the fact that it involves more effort, is because we expect more relevance in return – in the form of a pleasant feeling, or the pleasure of having solved a puzzle (Tanaka, 1992; Yus, 2003). Readers/viewers invest in processing, reckoning that the cost outweighs the effort.

However, Phillips (2000) has shown that there is a risk in putting cognitive challenges to the readers/viewers: appreciation depends on whether they are able to solve the riddle. Readers or viewers enjoy solving riddles and appreciation increases, but this increment reaches a turning point. Several studies have shown that if messages are considered too difficult to solve, demanding too much cognitive processing effort, readers/viewers may opt out, and appreciation will decrease (Phillips, 2000, Nordhielm, 2003, McQuarrie & Mick, 2003). Scott and Batra (2003) call this phenomenon the 'Inverted U-curve'. Since appreciation is claimed to be a function of complexity and comprehension, we would expect that extra implicit ads risk remaining more often uncomprehended than complex ads. To quote McQuarrie & Mick (2003):

Incongruity, like many of the other arousal factors investigated by Berlyne (1971), has an impact that conforms to an inverted U pattern. In the present case, too small an incongruity (i.e., insufficient deviation) implies that no figure is present; too large an incongruity means that the figure will not be successfully resolved. That is, as deviation becomes more extreme, the probability of its being incomprehensible goes up accordingly, and there is nothing pleasurable about a message that defies comprehension – instead, frustration or irritation is likely.' (McQuarrie & Mick, 2003, p. 208)

This entails that if the cost does not outweigh the effort, readers/viewers may get disappointed and frustrated.

Levels of implicitness

We have thus distinguished explicit and implicit advertisements. However, some advertisements pose extra processing challenges. In their diachronic account of rhetorical figures in magazine advertisements, Phillips & McQuarrie (2002) refer to advertisements containing more than one rhetorical figure as 'layered'. They report a tendency in more recent advertisements to contain more than one figure of speech, for instance a metaphor in the headline and a paradox in the body copy. Figures of speech can be seen as a form of implicit communication, but since we are not specifically dealing with rhetoric here, but with incongruity in a more general sense, we prefer to call these messages that contain more than one implicit element, 'extra implicit'. These messages provide the reader/viewer with riddles that attract his attention and that call for an interpretation. These little elements of information can be viewed of as extra cues that call for a solution. They trigger the reader/viewer to look for an appropriate interpretation. These extra cognitive cues are however not essential to the solution of the main message, they merely serve as attractors, sustaining the main message (see Figure 3 below for an example).

In sum, we distinguish three levels of implicitness. The first level contains explicit messages; the second level covers implicit, non-straightforward messages. The third level is reserved for implicit messages with extra



Figure 1. Nieuw van Honig: makkelijk en met lekkere recepttips [New from Honig: easy and with many tasty recipes]

cognitive steps and is called the extra implicit level. We consider explicit advertisements to be the least complex; extra implicit ads (= implicit ads with an extra cue) are viewed of as most complex.

Figures 1, 2 and 3 illustrate the 3 types of advertisements we distinguish. Figure 1 is an example of an explicit advertisement, which contains no incongruity: the message is straightforward, since the text tells us what we see in the picture, and the product itself is clearly depicted within the picture ('New from Honig. Easy and with many tasteful recipes'). Figure 2 is an example of a non-straightforward advertisement; the message is implied, not spelled out. The (rhetorical) question '*Moet de tent echt mee?* [Do we really have to bring the tent?]' implies that beer is more essential to successful camping than a tent. The intended message is left up to the own responsibility of the reader/viewer. Figure 3 contains an example of an extra implicit advertisement with an extra cognitive cue. The text contains an incongruity with respect to the picture: with '*de mooiste kant van Brugge* [the nicest side of Bruges]' we would expect a nice view



Figure 2. Moet de tent echt mee? [Do we really need to bring the tent?]

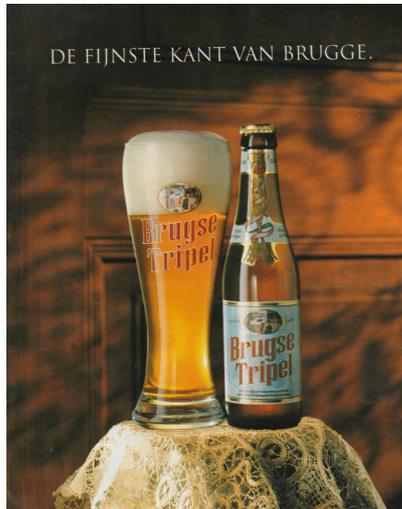


Figure 3. De fijnste kant van Brugge
[The nicest side/lace of Bruges]

of the historical city of Bruges, not a bottle of beer. But this advertisement contains a supplementary riddle. The word ‘kant’ is ambiguous in Dutch: there is the salient meaning of ‘side’, and there is the more specific meaning of ‘lace’. The supplementary riddle refers to this meaning of ‘kant’ and hints at it by depicting the typical lace on the pedestal of the beer (and Bruges is known for its lace).

In line with Relevance Theory, we expect a proportional increase of appreciation, with the experienced complexity, since extra effort leads to extra effect (Sperber and Wilson, 1995[1986]; Tanaka, 1992). We therefore expect that explicit advertisements will be evaluated more negatively than implicit and extra implicit advertisements.

Hypothesis 1. Explicit advertisements will be appreciated less than implicit advertisements and extra implicit advertisements.

Following Tanaka (1992) we expect that implicit advertisements, on their turn, will be appreciated less than extra implicit advertisements with supplementary clues, since extra processing effort will be rewarded with extra benefit (= appreciation).

Hypothesis 1a: Implicit ads will be appreciated less than extra implicit ads.

However, in line with the expected U-shaped curve of appreciation (cf. Phillips 2000, Nordhielm, 2003, McQuarrie & Mick, 2003, Scott & Batra, 2003), we expect that extra implicit ads remain more often uncomprehended than implicit ads. We therefore expect to find a pattern that follows an Inverted U-curve for appreciation.

Hypothesis 1b: Implicit advertisements will be appreciated more than explicit and extra implicit ads.

The latter hypothesis presupposes that chances are that readers/viewers are more frequently frustrated in their search for meaning and therefore more frequently opt out for the processing of extra implicit ads than for implicit ads – on average, these extra implicit ads will therefore be viewed less positively. In that sense, H1a is in contradiction with H1b. However, there is a possibility to reconcile both hypotheses, by using reported comprehension as a factor for appreciation. If the extra cognitive effort is effectively rewarded with extra relevance, appreciation will increase (cf. Van Mulken et al. 2003). We expect well understood, extra implicit advertisements to be appreciated more than well understood, implicit advertisements.

Hypothesis 2: If implicit and extra implicit advertisements are reported to be understood, extra implicit advertisements will be appreciated more than implicit ads.

Experiment

A total of 12 advertisements, four for each level of implicitness, were selected in a recursive process. All ads have been developed by professional copywriters and were published in various Dutch magazines in 2002, and were devised for a broad audience (see Appendix). In several plenary sessions with 20 post-graduate students, a large sample of advertisements was pretested. Only advertisements that could be indisputably attributed to one of the three groups, remained.

In all, 88 participants participated in the experiment. Participants were (44 female, 44 male) undergraduate students (mean age 22 years; range = 17 to 28 years). A within-participants design was used. A questionnaire was developed to elicit data from participants together with a full-colour booklet containing the original advertisements. To control for order effects, three further versions of the booklet were developed in which the order of ads was reversed. The experiment was self paced by the participants. The questionnaire consisted of 6 parts. Part one operationalized complexity on a 7-point scale, from very easy to understand to very difficult to understand. Appreciation was also operationalized on a 7-point scale (from very positive evaluation to very negative evaluation). Part two consisted of one open question, where participants could phrase spontaneously what they thought the claim of the ad was. Once participants had answered this open question for four advertisements, they were guided in the reporting of their comprehension, in that the claim of the ad was given, and participants were asked to tell whether they had this claim in mind, or not, or partially.

Parts 4 and 5 were checks on brand and product. Part 6 consisted of personal information.

The data were analyzed using a one-way analysis of variance followed by a post hoc test. Analyses by participants (F1) and by advertisements (items) (F2) were carried out. Significant effects in the F1-analysis suggest that these effects would occur again if different participants had been used, significant effects in the F2-analysis suggest that these effects would occur again if different slogans had been used.

Results

Table 1 presents the average judgement (with standard deviations) of the participants on appreciation of the advertisements, as a function of implicitness and the presence of extra cues. We checked for the estimation of complexity by demanding participants to rate their experienced complexity.

Table 1. Mean judgment (and standard deviations) on experienced complexity (1 = very easy to understand, 7 = very difficult) and appreciation (1 = very negative, 7 = very positive) as a function of the level of implicitness.

Subject Analysis	Experienced complexity	Appreciation
Explicit advertisements (type 1)	1.43 (0.65)	3.64 (1.07)
Implicit advertisements (type 2)	2.08 (0.9)	5.16 (0.66)
Extra implicit advertisements (type 3)	2.5 (1.0)	4.4 (0.87)

Advertisement	Claim	That's what I had in mind		
		Yes	No	Partially
Campina Botergoud	Botergoud is the best butter there is (in full, half full and daily with 25% fat)			

We see then that our classification of advertisements is conform the experienced complexity. Explicit advertisements are viewed as least complex ($M = 1.43$, $SD = 0.65$) and extra implicit advertisements are considered most complex ($M = 2.5$, $SD = 1.0$). A main effect of level of implicitness was obtained ($F_1(2, 86) = 56.69$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .57$; $F_2(2) = 4.4$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .49$). A post-hoc test (Tukey HSD) revealed that explicit ads (type 1) were significantly considered easier to understand than implicit and extra implicit ads (type 2 and 3).

We also see that implicit advertisements (type 2) are appreciated most ($M = 5.16$, $SD = 0.66$). Again, we have a main effect of level of implicitness ($F_1(2, 86) = 92.6$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .68$; $F_2(2) = 6.25$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .58$). A post-hoc test (Tukey HSD) revealed that explicit advertisements (type 1) and extra implicit advertisements (type 3) were significantly less appreciated than implicit ads (type 2).

As mentioned above, we also asked participants to check their comprehension of the advertisements with our proposition of the claims of the advertisements. Although alternative analyses were not necessarily wrong,² this check allowed us to gain more insight into the actual comprehension of the ad – since it is very well possible that participants report an implicit advertisement as fully understood and easy to comprehend, whereas in fact they may have missed an essential point. A second analysis was conducted to compare experienced complexity to reported comprehension of the ads (Table 2).³

The analysis revealed a main effect for level of implicitness (appreciation: $F_2(2) = 5.12$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .53$). However, this main effect was qualified by a significant interaction between Identification and Level of implicitness (appreciation: $F_2(2, 9) = 4.43$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .49$). This interaction is the result of the fact that advertisements that are reported to be understood, are appreciated more than those that are not understood. Pairwise comparisons revealed that explicit advertisements ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.36$) were significantly less appreciated

Table 2. Mean judgment (and standard deviations) on appreciation (1 = very negative, 7 = very positive) of the different types of advertisements as a function of the level of implicitness.

Item Analysis	Appreciation
Same Claim Identification	
Explicit advertisements (type 1)	3.58 (0.36)
Implicit advertisements (type 2)	5.36 (0.9)
Extra implicit advertisements (type 3)	4.68 (0.46)
Different Claim Identification	
Explicit advertisements (type 1)	4.05 (0.39)
Implicit advertisements (type 2)	4.97 (1.08)
Extra implicit advertisements (type 3)	4.14 (0.27)

than implicit advertisements ($M = 5.36$, $SD = 0.90$). Extra implicit advertisements did, however, not differ significantly from implicit advertisements.

There were no significant main effects for appreciation ($p > 0.1$) when an alternative claim was identified.

Conclusion and discussion

The experiment was conducted to test the hypothesis that explicit advertisements are appreciated less than implicit and extra implicit advertisements. This proved to be the case. We also put two conflicting hypotheses to the test, and it appears that only hypothesis 1b, concerning the inverted U-curve, cannot be refuted. Implicit advertisements were appreciated more than explicit advertisements but also more than extra implicit advertisements. However, this is also true for cases where participants claimed to have interpreted the advertisements in a manner similar to our reading of the advertisements. It appears then that if participants judge advertisements to be more complex, appreciation decreases. The results clearly show that extra implicit ads are also less appreciated by participants who claim to have understood the advertisements in a way similar to ours.

At first sight, the assumptions based on Phillips, 2000, Nordhielm, 2003, McQuarrie & Mick, 2003 and Scott & Batra, 2003 appear to be confirmed in our experiment. However, our second hypothesis – if extra implicit advertisements are reported to be understood, they will be appreciated higher than implicit ads – is to be refuted. We point out that these authors presuppose that the U-shape of the curve is due to the fact that participants did not succeed in resolving the incongruity. It appears, from our findings, that even if participants managed to decipher the more complex message, appreciation is less than for advertisements that are more easy to understand. Apparently, if more processing effort is to be invested in the decrypting of the message and if the reward consists of nothing more than the resolution of a riddle in an advertisement, participants feel that the amount of effort is out of proportion – there seems to be a normative judgment: advertisements should not take that much trouble to read. Audiences don't want to waste time going beyond a certain level of interpretive complexity (at least not without some more tangible reward than absorbing a sales message).

There are some caveats in our experiment. The analysis of part two in our questionnaire, the open question where participants were invited to phrase spontaneously the claim of the advertisement, shows that some participants came up with alternative interpretations that were as defensible as our own interpretations. For instance, the interpretation of the claim in Figure 4, 'What does canned white taste like?' meant (according to us) nothing more than 'Hoegaarden white beer is now available in cans'. However, several participants came up with an alternative, and even more satisfying solution: 'Hoegaarden white beer tastes heavenly'. These participants found the answer to the question ('What does canned white taste like?') in the accompanying visual: the clouds can be interpreted as a common metaphor for heaven. If they adopted this interpretation, then they have not analyzed the advertisement as an implicit



Figure 4. Hoe smaakt wit in blik [What does canned white taste like?]

advertisement (like we did), but as an extra-implicit advertisement. Since we did not ask our participants to write down their spontaneous interpretations for every claim in our experiment (only for 4 ads), we are unable to check for this bias.

In future research, the survey of the participant's interpretation of the advertisements should be included for every submitted ad. Although several plenary sessions with 23 participants⁴ have been devoted to the selection of advertisements, it appears that all participants had grown too involved to judge the items properly. The majority of the ads in our experiment concerned food products, targeted at a broad audience, whereas our research participants were all university educated. We deliberately worked with this group of participants, since implicitness involves a cognitive operation and this group is known to be more inclined to enjoy such a kind of cognitive challenge. However, in future research, we would like to invite a broader audience to participate in the experiment and match our findings with the outcome of a Need for Cognition questionnaire.

In spite of the many efforts dedicated to the definition of implicitness, incongruity and complexity in

previous research, it remains necessary to redefine these notions more in detail, in order to calibrate the different templates that allow the executions of an advertisement to be attributed to a recognizable group. Our taxonomy (explicit, implicit, extra-implicit) deserves to be refined. In future research, we therefore propose to make a difference between visual and verbal implicitness (Schilperoord & Maes, 2003). Further, we propose to take the focus of the implicitness into account as a factor that might influence the experienced complexity (cf. Lee & Mason, 1999, Van Mulken, Boon, & Kleijer, 2005).

In spite of the above-mentioned limitations, we may conclude that, in view of the considerable size effects of our findings, it seems that the level of implicitness plays an important role in the appreciation of advertisements. However, if it is true that people have a normative threshold with regard to the amount of effort they are ready to spend on the interpretation of advertisements – as our results seem to suggest – and if it is true that they are generally willing to spend more effort on art, riddles or puzzles (other types of arousal demanding cognitive effort) then this is something advertisers should seriously take into consideration. All our participants were students, who are known to have a predilection for cognitive ‘challenges’. Since the U-shape of our results indicates that appreciation decreases even if the most complex advertisements in our sample have been fully understood, this would mean that this type of advertisements, aiming at a less cognitively motivated target group, are even less probable to be positively evaluated.

Notes

1. Following Sperber & Wilson (1986) we refer to the sender as she, to the receiver as he.
2. Qualitative analysis of the open questions (part 2) revealed that many alternative interpretations were acceptable as well. We stress the fact that what strikes as incongruent may differ from individual to individual.

3. If participants reported to have had the same interpretation of the claim in mind as we suggested in the questionnaire, than their experienced complexity of the advertisement has most chances to be conform our estimation of the level of implicitness. If participants reported to have had another claim in mind, or a partial alternative, than their estimation of complexity will not be conform our own expectations.

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Appendix

Ads used in the experiment

Level of Implicitness	Product + Brand	Header	Visual
Explicit	Butter Campina Botergoud	Botergoud, de lekkerste roomboter... (Botergoud, the best butter there is)	Plastic butter dish
	Beer Heineken	Nieuw 12-pack (New 12-pack)	Box containing 12 bottles of beer
	Cake mix Honig	Nieuw van Honig (New from Honig)	Two packages containing cake mixes.
	Ice Tea Nestea	Nu verkrijgbaar in 3 verfrissende smaken (Now available in 3 refreshing flavours)	Three different cartons of ice tea
Implicit	Beer Bavaria	Moet de tent echt mee? (Do we really have to bring the tent?)	Young man trying to pack 4 crates of beer into an already fully packed car
	Peanut butter Calvé	Hoe groot wil je worden (How tall do you want to be?)	Feet of a young child placed on two jars of peanut butter next to a tape measure
	White beer Hoegaarden	Hoe smaakt wit in blik? (What does canned white taste like?)	Large can of beer in the clouds
	Hot chili sauce Heinz	[no text]	Next to a plate and cutlery is a handle of a fire extinguisher
Extra Implicit	Sauce Calvé	Leuker kunnen we het niet maken (We can't make it more enjoyable)	A number of blue sauce bottles placed in the envelope of the tax collection office
	Beer Brugse Tripel	De fijnste kant van Brugge (the nicest side of Bruges)	Bottle and glass of beer on a pedestal, covered with a piece of lace
	Liquorice Venco	Welkom Thuis (Welcome home)	Man 'sunbathing' in the rain, next to a Dutch wind mill, and typical Dutch liquorice
	Energy company Nuon	De mogelijkheden zijn eindeloos (Endless possibilities)	Delft blue dishes, cows and modern wind turbines